

Some benefits of peer–peer interaction: 10-year-old children practising with a communication task

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This paper explores peer–peer interactions of children using a spot-the-differences task in an EFL context in Hungary. The children were asked to practise with several sets of similar spot-the-differences tasks and the analysis focuses on the observable changes from the first to the last repetition. After the task performances were recorded, the children were invited to watch their first and last performances and comment on the changes they noticed in an interview. Both the analysis of their dialogues performing the tasks and their reflections clearly indicate that peer–peer interactions with this age group at a very low level of competence can bring various benefits and thus primary language teachers could consider introducing similar communication tasks with children with some confidence.

I Introduction

Language learning tasks (recent reviews by Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Edwards and Willis, 2005) have been explored with adult language learners but studies with children have been scarce even though learning English has seen a dramatic expansion to the primary sector in many contexts around the world (Kubaneck-German, 1998; Cameron, 2003). This study will attempt to explore 10-year-old Hungarian children's ability to interact with each other in English as a foreign language at a very basic level of competence, using a popular communication task, 'spot the differences'. A series of repeated performances with the same type of task will be explored to find out what gains this type of task repetition may bring. The study was motivated by the observation in many primary school contexts that the majority of language practice that learners receive tends to be centred around pattern practice, drilling and memorizing prefabricated expressions (e.g. Mitchell and Lee, 2003) rather than experimenting with fluency tasks to express their own meanings in a less restricted manner. Teachers often feel that children at a low level of competence are generally unable to handle communication tasks and benefit from them in any way.

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II Background

1 Language tasks and repetition

Tasks encourage learners to communicate with each other in real time. Due to the immediate pressures of spontaneous communication in tasks, learners have to simultaneously focus on both form and meaning. Since humans' processing capacity is limited (Anderson, 1995) and meaning is prioritized over form (Van Patten, 1990), manipulating learners' attention to focus on linguistic forms has become a key priority in research. Repetition is a task performance condition that can manipulate learners' attention through freeing up processing resource capacities. Bygate's work in the last decade has shown that in monologic tasks, repetition involves a special type of rehearsal where the learners can relate the repeated performance 'to information kept in the long term memory store' (Bygate, 2001: 28). When they have the chance to repeat a task, learners can shift their attention to produce more complex grammar, more appropriate vocabulary, and they can generally organize and optimize their language resources more effectively (Bygate, 1996; 2001; Gass *et al.*, 1999; Németh and Kormos, 2001; Bygate and Samuda, 2005).

When learners are exposed to interactive tasks, they can rely on their previous performances of the same task to a limited extent only since their interlocutor's contributions will always bring some novelty to the joint interaction. Interactive task solutions are co-constructed and speakers need to satisfy their interlocutors' needs in addition to monitoring their own performance. Some studies with adult learners have explored the effects of repeating interactive tasks (Plough and Gass, 1993; Platt and Brooks, 1994; Brooks *et al.*, 1997; Lynch and Maclean, 2000; 2001). Plough and Gass (1993) conducted a study using two tasks, a type of spot-the-differences task and a discussion task and found that students who repeated them used more confirmation checks to negotiate meaning with each other. Lynch and Maclean (2000; 2001) conducted a study which incorporated the repetition of a complex poster carousel task. This study involved mature adults learners of English in a medical ESP class. The students had to prepare a poster, display it and act as hosts answering questions of fellow students about it. The repetition of the tasks involved the hosts of the posters in explaining their messages to different people with different questions. Lynch and Maclean found that after six repetitions their students' language improved in many ways (2001: 221). All students produced more fluent and more accurate language, they all improved their phonology and vocabulary (both access and selection) and many of them improved their syntax, too. The subjects' ability to reflect on the changes was related to their proficiency level in English. The higher proficiency learners were better able to reflect on the changes brought about by the repetition of the task. With beginner-level students learning Spanish, two studies by Platt and Brooks (1994) and Brooks *et al.* (1997) showed that

task repetition even at lower levels of competence led to students being able to gain better control of the tasks by using less L1 and less overt statements of self-regulation.

2 *Children's peer-peer interactions*

One important aspect of interactions in tasks is the need to collaborate effectively with a partner and this requires an appreciation of the partner's needs. Children's overall ability to take their partner's needs in peer-peer interactions grows with age (Azmitia, 1988). Research in L1 development indicates that different age groups learn to cope with demands needed for peer-peer interactions gradually as they mature (Nelson, 1996; Ricard, 1993; Meadows, 1998; Wood, 1998; Anderson and Lynch, 1988). Young children often rely on adults to manage conversations for them (Scarcella and Higa, 1981). In the absence of the adult partner, when they are communicating with other children, they show weaknesses both as speakers and as listeners. As speakers they have difficulty in constructing unambiguous messages and as listeners they can't judge the adequacy of incoming messages (Lloyd *et al.*, 1984 and Robinson and Robinson, 1983). The ability to take full responsibility for one's own utterances as well as one's understanding of the partners' utterances are skills gradually increasing with age. All these developmental findings influence interaction in second or foreign languages and research in child second language learning clearly reflects these developmental influences. Studies involving child subjects working in pairs with other children or with adults have been carried out in different contexts (Van den Branden, 1997; Oliver, 1998; 2000; 2002; Mackey *et al.*, 2003; Ellis and Heimbach, 1997) and these studies have investigated various interactional processes, such as giving and utilizing feedback, question formation and meaning negotiation. The results indicate that children benefit from interacting with both peers and adults and with both NS and NNS interlocutors but both learner age and interlocutor type are important variables (Mackey *et al.*, 2003: 55). Mackey and Silver (2005: 243) claim that SLA research finding should not be generalized to children without adequate empirical evidence.

Little is known about peer-peer interactions of different age groups especially in EFL contexts, that is, what children can cope with and benefit from. Amongst the various age groups, 10-year-olds represent a special category because in some respect their ability to communicate is almost adult-like (Lloyd, 1990), but other research indicates that may share some of the characteristics of younger children (Garbarino and Scott, 1992: 65). For example, when faced with ambiguity, even 10–11 year olds can be reluctant to clarify messages (Cameron, 2001: 52 and Patterson and Kister, 1981). Focusing on the gaps identified above, i.e. lack of research into EFL contexts and with child subject working on tasks, in particular incorporating task repetition, this

study will aim to explore 10-year-old EFL children's peer–peer interaction using a spot-the-differences task. The main aim of the study is to identify what benefits the repetition brings, if any and whether the children are aware of these benefits.

III Design of the study

1 Participants

The children, Adam and Peter, were 10 years old and good friends in the same class in a primary state school in Hungary. At the time of the study they had been learning English as a foreign language in a traditional teaching context for two years. They were both enthusiastic about learning English. Their English classes closely followed the course book and emphasis was put on grammar, rehearsal of set dialogues and memorizing through rote learning. These children had never seen or used interactive tasks in their English lessons before and they never had the opportunity to use their English spontaneously without preparation or rehearsal.

2 The data collection

For each recording a different version of the spot-the-differences task was used (see Appendix A: Sample task sheets set used in the study for the first English recording for speakers A and B). The task is clearly meaning focused, conforming to Skehan's definition, (1998). According to this definition, in tasks meaning is primary and there is always some communication problem to solve. Tasks should also mirror comparable real-world activities and task completion has priority over other performance outcomes. In the spot-the-differences task each picture represented a scene of a house with three floors. The house consisted of four rooms (one bathroom, one kitchen and two other rooms) and there were various objects, and animals and people doing things in the different rooms. For each recording a variation from set to set was achieved by a random organization of the content items within the same scenes.

The following types of differences were used:

- Type 1: in picture A a particular item was present but it was missing in picture B (example: a cat sitting on a mat in one picture and in the other picture just a mat without the cat);
- Type 2: the number of a particular item in picture A was different from B (example: in one picture there were four apples on the kitchen surface while in the other one there were only two);
- Type 3: a particular item in picture A was replaced by something else in picture B, or the same person was doing something different in each picture (example: in the first picture a man was reading a book while in the other the same man in the same location was sleeping).

The distribution of the three types of differences was always constant for every version of the task: six differences always comprised two of each type ($2 + 2 + 2 = 6$). This variety of differences required that speakers paid attention to be explicit and careful with their language use and listen to and respond carefully to their partners. For example, both pictures contained items that were similar or appeared more than once in the house (e.g. there were fish in two different rooms in the sample pictures).

The children were told that the researcher, who designed these tasks, was interested in how the tasks would work with children who are learning English at school and the two boys agreed to try them out. It was made clear that their performances and opinions were only available to the researcher and they were not going to count towards their assessment at school. An informal briefing session was organized to show a sample set of the task to the children but no advice was given to them as to how to manage the tasks, how to help each other or what the best strategies would be to locate the differences. They were invited to do the task in their mother tongue (Hungarian) in order for them to familiarize themselves with the task and get a feel for how it works. Then they were recorded three times in English over a period of three weeks. The recordings took place in a small empty classroom during school hours but outside the children's English classes with only the researcher in the room, who had got to know the children prior to the study. The researcher did not interfere at all and the boys were in control as to when to stop the video-recorder.

Table 1 summarizes what happened week by week. During the first week the two boys were introduced to the project. During the next three weeks they were invited to do the same task (using a different set of pictures each time) three times in English. After the third English recording, the boys watched their own recording of their first and their last English performances to reflect on the changes and generally discuss the experience.

IV Data analysis

The two boys' performances were transcribed and changes between the different repetitions were analysed. According to Table 2, the most obvious change between the first and the last recording in English was the children's

Table 1 Summary of tasks and weekly repetitions

Week 1	Week 1	Week 2	Week 2	Week 3	Week 3
General introduction	L1	First L2	Second L2	Third L2	Viewing performances and Interview conducted in L1
TASK Version 1	Version 2	Version 3	Version 4	Version 5	

Table 2 Changes between performances

Peter/Adam Spot the Differences	English performance 1	English performance 2	English performance 3
Differences explicitly acknowledged	1	2	5
Word/minute output	20 words	29 words	54 words
Time to complete the task	12.7 minutes	8.2 minutes	5.1 minutes

fluency on the task in that their general pace improved and they became less hesitant. They also appeared to have become more confident and relaxed by the last recording. In this paper, however, I will focus on another aspect of their interaction. It seemed that the opportunity to repeat the task helped them to appreciate each other's needs better in view of the demands of the task. In particular I will look at peer assistance and their ability to pay attention to each other's utterances. Finally, I will also discuss the extent to which they were aware of the benefits observable in their interactions.

1 Evidence of peer assistance

Given that children at this age are still developing their skills as speaking partners, it was of particular interest to examine to what extent they appreciated their conversational partner's needs and whether their ability to do this was going to be affected by the task repetition.

One convincing feature of the data is that both children assisted each other throughout all the performances. In the first English recording, there are several occasions where Peter, the more competent speaker assists his partner's utterances.

Excerpt 1: English 1 performance

- Line 2 Adam: Hm, *a konyha* (the kitchen) is + is near the man.
Line 3 Peter: The man is eating one sandwich. *A konyha* (kitchen) kitchen. *Nem baj* (It does not matter).
Line 4 Adam: Near my *hűtő* (fridge) there are milk, cheese and *kenyér* (bread).
Line 5 Peter: *Angolul*. (In English) Bread.
Line 6 Adam: Bread. My ++ room is a man ++ *Van egy ember egy gitárral a kezében* (There is a man and he has got a guitar in his hand).

In this excerpt, Adam in the second line of the recording is trying to say something about a man in the kitchen but he does not know the word 'kitchen' in English and inserts it in L1. Peter completes his half-formed sentence (he is

eating a sandwich) and because he knows 'kitchen' in English, he immediately takes the opportunity to translate the word for his friend. He softens his own corrective feedback by adding that 'it does not matter' in L1 (line 3). This sounds like encouragement for Adam to carry on. Adam carries on describing other things in the kitchen but does not know the words 'fridge' or 'bread' either and again uses them in L1 (line 4). Peter, again, takes the opportunity to provide the word for 'bread', which Adam immediately echoes in the next line.

Peter's assistance with the words 'kitchen' and 'bread' is taken up by Adam just three lines later and he also remembers the English word for fridge. In the excerpt below Peter is describing his living room with the dancing people when Adam switches direction.

Excerpt 2: English 1 performance

- Line 9 Peter: In my room there is a +++ in my room there are people and they dancing.
 Line 10 Adam: The kitchen is fridge cheese near the fri, fridge + + + + the kitchen is the near the apple is near the bread. And bread near the milk.

Adam ignores Peter's contribution about the dancing people because he wants to go back to the kitchen to describe more objects. This is of course a diversion in terms of his partner's input but his utterance is a display of what he can do now: he can describe the kitchen using English for all those words he could not remember at the beginning (fridge, bread, kitchen).

In their second English performance, the boys continue assisting each other. At the beginning Peter is describing his living room and he points out that he has got a castle. He decides to repeat this word in L1. This is a precautionary measure as he suspects that his friend might not know this word. This is the first time that he assists Adam proactively, without any evidence from Adam that he needs it.

Excerpt 3: English 2 performance

- Line 4 Peter: Hm. In my living room there are a *kastély* (castle), castle.

Later on in the same recording the weaker learner, Adam, has also got a chance to assist his friend. This is his first time to help Peter.

Excerpt 4: English 2 performance

- Line 10 Peter: In my kitchen there are three, one potato and three *tojás* (eggs).
 Line 11 Adam: My kitchen is 3 egg, one potato and two chicken.

In line 10 above Peter slots in the word 'egg' in Hungarian. Adam immediately responds by providing the English word for his friend.

In the third recording there are still more examples where Peter assists Adam. What is new here is that Peter's attention moves to the more formal aspects of language rather than just providing missing lexical items.

Excerpt 5: English 3 performance

- Line 3 Adam: Yes. My bedroom in one dog.
 Line 4 Peter: Yes. In my bedroom there is a spider.
 Line 5 Adam: No, two spider.
 Line 6 Peter: /z/
 Line 7 Adam: Spiders. In my living room one cat.
 Line 8 Peter: Yes.

In line 4 Peter says that he has got a spider. Adam says no, he has got ‘two spider’ (line 5). Peter then takes a second to correct his friend’s English by adding the plural suffix /z/ (line 6). Adam repeats the word using the correct plural form ‘spiders’ in line 7.

Adult studies have demonstrated that peer assistance can lead to learners using more target-like grammar in interactive tasks (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2000; 2001). There is evidence in this data too, that the weaker learner, Adam, developed the target structure for describing people across the repetitions of the task with his friend’s assistance. In the first English recording Adam did not attempt any descriptions using the present progressive but he heard Peter use it to describe things in his picture. Peter used the structure in the first English performance four times in lines 3, 9, 11 and 31.

Excerpt 6: English performance 1

- Line 3 Peter: The man is eating one sandwich.
 Line 9 Peter: In my room there is a (++++) in my room there are people and they dancing.
 Line 11 Peter: In my room *a középső szobát nézd* (look at the middle room) in my room sleeping a girl.
 Line 31 Peter: In my room there is three people two people is dancing and one sleeping on the chair.

Although Peter’s utterances are not entirely correct, they still served as models for Adam who avoided using the structure altogether in the first recording.

In the second recording Adam uses his first description with the present progressive tense.

Excerpt 7: English performance 2

- Line 3 Adam: My living room three people draw.

Although this is still incorrect, it is Adam’s first attempt at using the structure. In the third recording Adam used the present progressive again, this time assisted by his friend and together they co-constructed the correct sentence to describe somebody. Adam placed the auxiliary correctly, which is a positive change compared to his last attempt in performance 2, but he did not know the main verb ‘drink’ in English, so Peter helped him out.

Excerpt 8: English 3 performance

- Line 13 Adam: Yeah. No. The boy is *iszik* (drinking).
 Line 14 Peter: Hm, drinking.

In the first recording it was Peter who assisted Adam with lexical items that he did not know. Adam appreciated this and immediately made use of his assistance. During the second recording Peter continued to assist his friend but used a more proactive form of assistance. It was during this recording that Adam also assisted Peter. Finally, in the last recording Peter shifted his attention and helped his friend with the correct plural marker for spiders and helped to co-construct a correct description using the present progressive structure.

2 Evidence of paying attention to each other's utterances

The data also indicate that the opportunities to repeat the spot-the-differences task led to changes in the way the two boys paid attention to each other's utterances and to the demands of the task at hand. At the beginning they considered the spot-the-differences task to be an opportunity to display their own knowledge almost irrespective of what their partners had to say. By the end, it was obvious that their interpretation had moved on from 'an individual task' to 'a joint game' and they had learnt to take notice and build on each other's utterances.

One basic characteristic feature of referential gap tasks, such as the spot-the-differences task, is that both participants need to pay attention to what their partners are saying because it is only by building up joint information that they can find and keep tally of the differences. In the earliest performance it is evident that Adam and Peter do not acknowledge each other's descriptions and utterances. Instead, they take turns at describing their own houses.

Excerpt 9: English 1 performance

- Line 13 Peter: *A fürdőszobában egy lány száll ki a kádból* (In the bathroom there is a girl getting out of the bath).
 Line 14 Adam: Yes and the man ++ the dog ++ near the man.
 Line 15 Peter: Yes, in my room there is reading a book a man on the bed.
 Line 16 Adam: The ++++
 Line 17 Peter: The cheese is under the fridge *vagy* (or) ++ yes.
 Line 18 Adam: The window is yellow and the chicken in the window and three red flowers.

Here Peter initiates a search in L1 in line 13. Adam responds by saying yes but his attention seems to be elsewhere because he immediately moves the search to another part of the picture. Then, Peter starts another search in the bottom right-hand side of the picture and there is no response from Adam. Adam does not seem to be able to take his next turn so after a long silence,

Peter decides to continue. He moves away from the previous description and starts describing the kitchen. He says there is cheese under the fridge. Adam does not respond to this. Instead, he is concerned with what he can say and describes a yellow chicken in the window. There is a lack of acknowledgement of each others' contributions. This is problematic in the sense that differences may be missed or misinterpreted. Both partners leave 'gaps' in the interaction as they seem to be more concerned with what they can say themselves rather than what their partner said. They are saying what they can, similarly to the learner described by Ellis (1985) who was asked to comment on a picture showing a bike and respond to the question of what was wrong with the bike, but he could only name colours.

In the second English performance Peter, for the first time, thinks of using a clarification request rather than just ignoring utterances that are problematic or ambiguous. They also both use explicit verbal acknowledgement of the each other's descriptions at every turn. They use names for the rooms, which shows that after the first English performance there was a realization that they needed more explicit ways of referring to parts of the pictures. They may have looked these words up or asked somebody. In any case, after completing the first English performance they noticed this gap themselves and looked for resources to fill them. Another new feature of this second recording is that they come closer to each other by repeating each other's phrases and patterns. For example, <In my living room> occurs five times as the beginning phrase of each line from lines 14 to 19 (below).

Excerpt 10: English 2 performance

- Line 14 Peter: Yes, in my living room there are, there is a ball and ball and *vagy egy meg egy . . . Van naked?* (Or one and one, have you got one?)
- Line 15 Adam: Yes in my living room *van egy vödör meg egy óra.* (There is a bucket and a clock.)
- Line 16 Peter: Yes in my living room there are a TV *a szobában van egy akvárium amiben van egy halacska.* (In the room there is an fishtank and in it a fish.)
- Line 17 Adam: *Igen* (yes) In my kitchen is . . . chicken. (inaudible)
- Line 18 Peter: Yes. In my living room there are six books.
- Line 19 Adam: Yes in my living room is two cactus.

In line 14 above Peter describes his living room and says he has got a ball. He then directly questions his partner whether he has got the same. Adam replies and confirms that this is the same in his picture. It is noticeable that each utterance is followed by an explicit acknowledgement of the previous utterance. The use of acknowledgements, the use of the names of rooms and the willingness to ask clarification questions, which were evidently missing from their previous performance bring these two speakers closer to each other. They are paying more attention to each other's utterances. This means that they can control the task more effectively, find more differences and can finish it more quickly.

By the last repetition, their attention to each other is constant throughout. They acknowledge every single utterance and respond helpfully to each other. It is noticeable in this last extract below that they spend more time exploring the kitchen, for example, before they change the focus to another part of the picture. They focus on just one part of the room until they are satisfied that they found all the differences. This is a good strategy that helps with locating the differences. They are also using elliptical phrases and complete each other's half finished utterances rather than use rigid full sentences as before.

Excerpt 11: English 3 performance

- Line 16 Peter: Yes. In my kitchen in my kitchen on the right there is a picture and on the picture is 2 children.
 Line 17 Adam: *Hol?* (Where?)
 Line 18 Peter: *Jobbra a konyában.* On the right in the kitchen. [Adam gestures differences].
 Line 19 Adam: My kitchen is two apples.
 Line 20 Peter: Yes. In my kitchen near the fridge there is one milk, one cheese and one bread.
 Line 21 Adam: Yes. In the kitchen two cactus.
 Line 22 Peter: Yes. In my living room there is a table.
 Line 23 Adam: Yes.
 Line 24 Peter: And 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, eight books.
 Line 25 Adam: No.

In line 16 above Peter is describing his kitchen in more detail. He mentions the picture on the wall and the two children on it. Adam is not sure where the picture is so he decides to question his friend: where? (in L1). Peter says it is on the right (in L1 in line 18). Adam shakes his head and Peter gestures the differences using his fingers. Adam adds more information about the kitchen. There are two apples. Peter agrees. They continue about the kitchen for two more descriptions. Peter mentions the fridge, milk, cheese and bread and Adam mentions the two cactuses. Then Peter moves the search to the living room. He describes the table (line 22) and Adam says he has got that too (line 23). Peter takes the next turn and counts out the eight books (line 24). Adam disagrees. 'No' clearly suggests that this is a difference.

By the last repetition Adam and Peter have learnt to enjoy this task as a game as they are using more natural language, they concentrate on each other's messages and attempt to work out ambiguities and misunderstandings when necessary. They seem to have realized that describing one particular part of the picture is an effective strategy to use which means that they understood the importance of this internal task demand.

3 Adam and Peter's comments

After recording the tasks, the two children were invited together for an interview with the researcher to talk about the tasks and the benefits of

repetition as they perceived them. This interview was conducted in L1 and the comments below are all translated from Hungarian. The boys watched their first and last performances and commented on the differences they noticed. This is how they commented on their first performance in English:

- Adam: It is not going very well. I am thinking what to say and I am waiting for Adam to say something. At first it was a bit tricky because we did not know it.
- Peter: At the beginning when we got stuck we just started a different sentence or continued in Hungarian.
- Adam: At the beginning I was thinking what this or that word could be. If I remembered, I said it, if not, then I said it in Hungarian. Or waited until Peter said something. It also happened that when Peter did not know a sentence, I said one.

They notice their initial lack of fluency and general hesitation. Adam's comments show that in the first performance they were more concerned with their own utterances and they were saying what they could rather than paying attention to each other.

Next, they explain why they felt they were struggling at the beginning. Peter clearly says that the difficulty lay in their lack of familiarity with the task. The other reason that they both mention is the lack of words needed to describe items in the pictures. Their concern with vocabulary is clearly evident in the performances in that many of their attempts to assist each other described earlier were related to vocabulary. This concern is clearly articulated in their reflections too.

- Peter: We forgot the names of the rooms in English and this made it more difficult. We did not know what fish was or butterfly. It was difficult to explain that someone is sleeping or doing something else.
- Adam: It was difficult to explain some words because we did not learn them in class yet. We did not learn, for example, that someone is listening to music with the headphones on, or someone is dreaming about something. We did not learn roof.

After viewing the third performance in English they both reported that they became more confident and relaxed using their English. They completed the last task more fluently and they were more familiar with the type of vocabulary that was called upon.

- Peter: In the third one I knew it was going to go well. When you are relaxed and there is nothing else in your mind it goes more easily. There were similar words to the previous ones. This made it easier. We knew the names of those objects.
- Adam: In this one it went more quickly. These differences were easier. We could explain the differences better. We learnt about each other's ways of speaking.

Adam above also comments that by the third recording they could explain their messages better and adds that they learnt about each other's ways of speaking which suggests that they were paying more attention to what each other were saying.

The boys also talked about what they thought they learnt from this experience. The first thing they could think of was new vocabulary.

Peter: We have learnt some new words.

However, further reflections revealed that they also learnt about the demands of this task. For example, Peter says that in a task like this you can organise your searches more systematically.

Peter: First I picked a room, wherever I thought might be a difference. I started with that. For example, someone is sleeping, or there is a cat or there is only one cactus. This is not the best way. You can take each room one by one. And then you need to list all the objects in that room. What is where.

Next, Adam clearly explains that short responses to the partner's utterances do not necessarily work because further details could be important and they need to be articulated.

Adam: I think when one person says what they have got, for example, a dog, the other person who says 'no' should add what he has got if not a dog.

Both these comments indicate their growing awareness to pay attention to what the partner is saying in order to meet the challenges of the task.

The children clearly enjoyed the task and seeing the improvements between the performances gave them a real sense of satisfaction. Adam explains why he enjoyed the challenge:

Adam: Yes, I liked this task because it was quite tricky and you had to explain what you meant somehow. In the English classes sometimes we work in pairs but we have to learn it by heart, both the questions and the answers. We have to ask each other how old we are and where we live, and things like that. That's all.

V Discussion

The task repetition clearly led to many gains for these two children. They enjoyed the experience of speaking English in a spontaneous manner with each other, managed to complete the task by the last repetition more fluently. They both assisted each other across the repetitions but in particular the more competent learner assisted the weaker one in many different ways. In addition, both children improved their grasp of the task and appreciated better what the task demands were. They learnt to pay attention and respond to each other and respond more carefully. On the first occasion they handled the task as one that requires each speaker to simply display their knowledge of English irrespective of the partner's contributions and later they turned the task into a joint fast-moving game that they tackled with confidence. The interview indicated that they were able to see the benefits of the task repetition and were aware of many of the positive changes that occurred in their performances.

All this evidence suggests that using this kind of task repetition with communication tasks can work effectively with children of this age at low levels of proficiency. In addition, it may be the case that this kind of task repetition (i.e. practising with the same task type) can provide a scaffold that children can benefit from without or before the intervention from the teacher. Through a series of task repetition these two children moved from less effective to more effective ways of handling both this gap task and each other as conversational partners. Interacting with a peer on repeated occasions can be a rich learning experience and working with the same partner over several repetitions means children can grow more confident. In classrooms this can be a fruitful way of introducing tasks: getting children to practise with the same partner and then to think about what they did and why and how they improved. One overall implication for classrooms is that it is possible to introduce fluency tasks in primary English classrooms early on to let children experience communication that is more 'real' than drilling and pattern practice. It is however important to add that these two boys were 10 years old and younger children may have not been able to collaborate with each other and take advantage of the repetitions in the same way.

It is of course not possible to claim that all the changes happened as a result of the task repetition exclusively. The task performances and the follow-up interview were recorded over a period of three weeks and even though the children were not encouraged to do any preparation or consultation with anybody, it would have been unnatural for them not to mention their experiences to anyone and above all not to talk about it between them. It is quite likely that the children talked about the tasks to their parents, friends, siblings or teachers. They may also have looked at their English textbooks, dictionaries or other sources to find words such as names of rooms or names of animals. This study did not attempt to set up a direct cause and effect relationship between repetition and learning in an experimental manner because many of the variables were not controlled. Instead, the claim is that repetition offered regular opportunities and a vehicle for the children to display their growing ability to interact with each other and control a specific type of task without any intervention from the teacher. Assisting each other promptly, paying attention to each other or realizing that they had to tighten the search for differences could not have been improved in any other way outside the task but by directly participating in the task on repeated occasions.

A final note is about the design features of this task. In this particular task success was built up step by step, as children had to locate six differences, one after the other. One difference and how they dealt with it did not necessarily have any effect on the rest of the differences. For example if one difference was missed or misinterpreted, it was still possible for that pair to find the other five and achieve a good score. This feature of the task, which I call 'isolated problem' feature, gives the opportunity to the speakers to practise tackling the same type of problem and producing the same type of language six times within the same task. This is a great source of support. There is an

opportunity for the speakers, even at a very low level of proficiency, to use some language comfortably over and over again but still in a meaningful situation, where there is a real communication gap between the two speakers. When one difference is located, the speakers' motivation and enthusiasm is likely to be boosted because each difference contributes to the overall success, and takes the speakers one step closer to the final solution.

VI Conclusion

This study supports earlier research by suggesting that it is important to provide practice in task repetition. The analysis of the data illustrates that repetition of this kind can be beneficial at low levels of proficiency with children, not just adults. These encouraging results may suggest that teachers with beginner-level child learners can be more confident that peer-peer interactions, at least for this age group, offer multiple benefits to learners and practising with similar tasks is an effective way of encouraging these positive changes to take place. It is of course important to add that different age groups need different task types and younger children are less likely to notice the demands of the task or the needs of the interlocutor.

There are naturally limitations to the tentative claims made in this paper. Most importantly, the analysis focused only on one learner pair. Other limitations include the choice of one specific task and a specific teaching/learning and cultural context. Research with different tasks, more learners in different contexts and of different age groups would be essential to begin to build up a picture about the processes that occur in children's peer-peer interactions in language tasks.

VII References

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Appendix A

Sample test sheet A:



(Appendix drawings A and B attributed to the author).

Sample task sheet B:



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